Bishop Christopher's Easter Message - published in the Sunday Telegraph

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‘I saw the old cathedral as standing clearly for the sacrifice, one side of the Christian Faith and I knew my task was to design a new one which should stand for the Triumph of the Resurrection’. That was the vision of Basil Spence, architect of Coventry’s new Cathedral, when he first conceived its design following the wartime bombing of the city and its Cathedral. His work, completed 50 years ago in 1962, became a symbol of the resurrection not only of a city but of a country and continent rising from the destruction of war into the new possibilities of peace and prosperity.

Today, Easter Day, in the Cathedral’s Golden Jubilee, the momentous story that Spence set out in stone has been enacted through ancient ceremonies as worshippers gathered in the darkness of the ruined Cathedral to see a fire burning once again. Not, this time, the fire of war but the fire of the new creation, the fire of God’s inextinguishable love from which the new light of the Easter candle is taken and processed through the crowds, penetrating the night as surely as the deacon’s voice fills the silence with the sound of the simple song – ‘The light of Christ!’. The light is shared among the faithful, the cavernous space of the new Cathedral is ablaze as voices proclaim that ‘Christ is risen, indeed!’ and the jewels of twentieth century art commissioned by Spence become visible:John Hutton’s exquisitely carved saints and angels in glass, Ralph Beyer’smagnificent Tablets of the Word, Graham Sutherland’s extraordinary tapestry of the ascended Christ.

We are in a new world. A redeemed world evident in the skill of humanity turned from the dark arts of destruction to awe-inspiring creativity. A renewed world reflected in the faces of human beings, young and old, transformed by the movement from darkness to light. A resurrected world tangible in the lives of those baptised into the Easter waters and anointed with the oil of the new creation in confirmation.

‘I have seen the Lord’, proclaimed Mary Magdalene on the first Easter Day. As the powerful spotlights are thrown onto the beautiful face of Sutherland’s ascended Christ, we too – on this twenty-first century Easter morning – see the Christ, crucified and risen for the salvation of the world.

Spence’s architectural theology works. It’s quite right that the Post Office have named him in 2012 a ‘Briton of Distinction’ and given him a stamp! His story in stone works because it is faithful to the deep truths of the Christian Faith – that resurrection, new life and hope do not come easily to the world, or to God. They are birthed into being through death, through sacrifice, through God’s bearing of the world’s violence so that we may live in peace.

The bleak ruins of Coventry’s old Cathedral remain as a permanent memorial to the violence that humanity inflicts upon itself. They witness to the human history of violence of which we are all victims and, even,

perpetrators. It is a cycle of violence that God steps into, becoming one of its victimsin order to become its victor by refusing to become one of its perpetrators. God breaks the cycle by absorbing its pain and exposing the cruel logic that perpetuates it.

In the Jubilee Year of the new Cathedral, the ruins of the old are being re-designated as an international memorial to all civilian victims of war and casualties of conflict wherever they are, in whatever part of the world, including victims of our own wars – Iraq, Afghanistan, Argentina, to name only some of the most recent.Indeed, the Falklands Conflict is especially poignant and challenging for Coventry. The actual day of the Cathedral's 50th Anniversary – 25th May 2012 – is also the 30th Anniversary of the sinking of HMS Coventry in 1982. How do we turn the pain of that memory into a set of practices for peace that will end even the rumour of war between two nations? History can help.

In a few weeks' time the Cathedral will receive a gift from Dresden's Frauenkirche, decimated by the fires of our own bombs in 1945, but rebuilt to its former baroque glory as recently as 2005. It's called the Choir of Survivorsand will be the first physical expression of solidarity in suffering with former enemies to stand in the ruins of Coventry's Cathedral whichfor 70 years has called to mind the suffering of the city's citizens. We hope it will be followed by many more statements and symbols of the common plight of human beings of every race and language, creed and colour who have found themselves caught up in the machinations of conflict and paid its price.

The story of the restored relationship between Britain and Germany is a remarkable one in which Coventry's story has played no small part. Coventry not only extended a hand of fellowship in suffering to the damaged cities of Kiel, Dresden, Berlin and many others, it also proclaimed that the route to resurrection for Europe, and the world, is through reconciliation, and a costly reconciliation at that. The spiritual architect of the Coventry vision was the wartime Provost, Dick Howard. He saw his beloved Cathedral burn to the ground, devastated by violence, and he determined that it would rise from the ruins as a symbol of peace for the world built upon the words of an earlier victim of violence, 'Father, forgive'. With the radical zeal of a prophet, this cultured Cathedral cleric chose – against the clamour of the crowds - to truncate Christ's word from the cross. He saw that Jesus' actual words, Father, forgive them . . .', when placed on more ordinary lips, must be simply, 'Father, forgive'. I like to call this the Coventry confession of complicity. We are all, in a very real way, responsible for the violence of war that still reeks such terror in Afghanistan, Israel-Palestine, the Sudan, Syria, Iraq and the list goes on and depressingly on.

Easter tells us that there is a way out of this cycle, there is a resurrection for the world, humanity can rise to a new future. But this resurrection will only come through a common confession of complicity in the causes of the world's agony and a mutual recognition that reconciliation is better, safer and, indeed, cheaper than violent retaliation. Without it even Jerusalem, where Mary first saw the risen Christ, will be forever trapped in its walls of division.

The Church on this Easter Day is called to renew its confidence in the great story of Christ's death and resurrection told through the pages of the Bible, celebrated in symbols and ceremonies, structured into our landscape through our churches and expressed in the best of our country's values. For all our departures from it, this story of resurrection through reconciliation remains the hope of the nations.

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